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INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORIENTATION AND  
PERSISTENCE

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the degree of Doctor of Education

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## INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORIENTATION AND PERSISTENCE

### ABSTRACT

This study sought to understand persistence from a student's perspective. In the past, student success courses were able to provide students with the opportunity to learn the college-readiness skills essential to student persistence. Developmental education reform in Florida has restructured course requirements, and students can now decide if they want to enroll in a student success course. This leaves colleges exploring alternatives to assist students in gaining the skills they need to be successful in college. This study used Tinto's student integration theory as a conceptual framework to determine if students thought orientation helped them integrate both socially and academically into the institution and if it ultimately influenced their decision to reenroll the next semester. This qualitative case study used semi-structured interviews to learn how students engaged with the various orientation components and understand whether orientation helped students become integrated into the college. Through the interviews, the study found the students' decision to return the following semester rested on a friendly college environment, access, and the quality of instruction. Orientation was a framework and an introduction to the college environment that ultimately made students feel comfortable using resources, asking questions, and getting involved.

University of New England

Doctor of Education  
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Harvard University first introduced information orientation in the 1600s (Mayo, 2013). Higher education began using formal orientation programs in the early 1900s, and they gained mainstream traction in the 1980s (Ewing-Cooper & Parker, 2013). In 1972, the University of South Carolina started dedicating resources and staff members to University 101 (Mayo, 2013). This concept spread to other universities, and in 1982, the first conference met to discuss the first-year experience (Mayo, 2013). The goal of orientation has been to acclimate students to college and give them the tools and resources needed to be successful (Karp & Bork, 2012).

Crisp and Taggart (2013) explained student success courses go beyond orientation programming and are “centered on providing information and assistance to students in the areas of study skills, learning styles, strategies for college success, educational and career planning and development, introduction to campus facilities, resources, services, and personal development” (p. 117). Students develop their information networks and start feeling academically integrated during student success courses (Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2010). Orientations are typically held prior to the semester, are only a few hours, and are non-credit. Student success courses are typically offered during the semester, run the entire length or a portion of the semester, and act as an extension of orientation programs. The course is normally between one and three credits and costs the same per credit hour as a degree-seeking course. In Florida, student success courses are considered an elective, which requires students to deduct from their available elective credits. Student success courses are longer than an orientation. Therefore, additional topics are built into the curriculum and are linked to student retention. Crisp and Taggart (2013) found students who

completed a student success course were more likely to persist to the next semester and ultimately earn a college credential (p. 123).

St. Petersburg College (SPC) is an open-access state college in Florida with 44,411 credit-seeking students (St. Petersburg College, 2016a). SPC offers certificate programs, associates in arts, associates in science, and bachelor's degree programs. In the fall of 2016, 72.4% of students were part-time earning an average of 7.5 credits (St. Petersburg College, 2016b, para. 6). Like most institutions, St. Petersburg College had an orientation program. Prior to fall 2014, orientation was required for all students who tested into two or more developmental education courses. SPC reported a 92% retention rate for students who attended orientation in the fall of 2013 (St. Petersburg College, 2013, p. 5). This success was cut short when the Florida Legislature voted to reform developmental education, exempting a large number of students from taking the placement test and developmental education coursework (St. Petersburg College, 2014).

Students who were exempt from developmental courses were then exempt from orientation and student success courses as well. This significantly reduced the number of students who attended the pre-semester, four-hour orientation. In an attempt to attract more students to attend orientation, the program was shortened from 4 hours to 2 hours, and ultimately to 1.5 hours. The length of the program had little impact on attendance. This resulted in students starting the semester with little to no knowledge about the resources and tools available.

Retention has been important to colleges in Florida because it is a component of the state's performance-based funding metric. Retention and persistence are often used interchangeably. However, by definition, persistence is looking at student enrollment from term to term whereas retention is defined as enrollment year to year. In Florida, \$60 million is

dedicated to the performance-based funding account (Florida College System, n.d., para. 6). However, \$30 million comes from funding that was historically allocated directly to the state colleges. Now, a portion of funding depends on where a college ranks in the performance-based funding criteria. Not only is it important to study the effectiveness of programs geared to increasing success and retention to help students succeed in college, but for funding purposes as well.

In 2015, SPC launched Smart Start, a free, mandatory, non-credit orientation program taught by career and academic advisors. Smart Start merges the elements of a traditional orientation with some of the content found in student success courses. In Smart Start, students learn about the learning support center, library resources, career development, college rules and policies, financial aid, and academic planning.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Tinto (1993) explained the most critical time for student retention is the first semester because students' "withdrawal from an institution . . . is most frequent in the first semester of the freshman year" (p. 58). During the first semester, students must learn how to navigate through the college's rules and processes and develop social relationships. The "students who do not have this knowledge—often referred to as college-readiness skills—are unlikely to be successful in college, even if they have the required academic skills" (Karp & Bork, 2012, p. 6). These skills are often taught in student success courses. Due to the course structure, student success courses often give students the ability to build their information networks (Karp et al., 2010). Information networks lead to students feeling academically and socially integrated into the institution (Karp et al., 2010). Students who feel integrated are more likely to persist to the next semester (Tinto, 1993).

Zeidenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno (2007) found the persistence rates increased by 10% for students who completed both a remediation and student success course and 7% higher for students who only completed a student success course (Zeidenberg et al., 2007, p. 4). At SPC, students enrolled in a student success course in fall 2014 had a 79% persistence rate (Business Intelligence, 2018). This was prior to Smart Start. The persistence rate for first-time college students not enrolled in a student success course in fall 2016 but enrolled in Smart Start was 80% (Business Intelligence, 2018). Student success courses provide students with a strong foundation. While developmental education reform allows select students to opt out of taking developmental coursework, at SPC, students are required to take Smart Start despite possible exemption from developmental education coursework. Smart Start provides students the tools and resources linked to persistence and are traditionally found in the student success courses that are no longer required for the majority of students.

Crisp and Taggart (2013) reported only 50% of first-time college students attending community colleges returned their second year (p. 114). At SPC, from 2009 through 2013, the persistence rates for first-time college students from fall to spring ranged from 85-88% (Business Intelligence, 2018). After the passage of the developmental education reform, persistence rates for first-time college students from fall 2014 to spring 2015 dropped to 82% (Business Intelligence, 2018). The persistence rates for fall 2016 to spring 2017 for first-time college students was 79% (St. Petersburg College, 2018, p. 19). In the past, student success courses had a positive impact on student persistence. However, enrollment in student success classes has significantly declined because of the development education reform. At SPC, enrollment in student success courses declined by 43% between fall 2013 and fall 2017 (Business Intelligence, 2018). The course equipped students with the skills needed for first-time college students. With

this course no longer required, SPC needed to find an alternative method to provide students with the skills and resources needed to be successful and persist in college. First-time college students who completed Smart Start between fall 2015 and fall 2017 were 13% more likely to persist to the next semester compared to students who did not complete the course (Illume Impact, 2018). Smart Start had similar content as a student success course. The conversational format and easy access to the instructor mirrored that of student success courses. The course format created an ideal condition for students to develop their information networks and become engaged in the college environment, thereby starting the first steps of being academically and socially integrated into the institution.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine what impact, if any, orientation had on students feeling integrated into the institution and their decision to persist to the next semester. In 2015, SPC created Smart Start, an orientation program required for all new students. This free, non-credit course gives students the opportunity to engage with academic and non-academic resources. The course reviewed learning support, out-of-class support, financial aid, rules and policies, student life and leadership, career readiness, and academic planning. SPC understood first-time college students who complete Smart Start were more likely to persist. This study evaluated the students' perceptions to determine what impacts, if any, the orientation program had on their integration and their decision to return the following semester.

### **Research Question**

The primary research question was what impact, if any, students perceived orientation had on their integration and their decision to return the following semester. This research examined student responses from the following questions:



1. What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate academically into the institution?
2. What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate socially into the institution?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The most widely used theories when discussing retention have been Astin's (1985) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1993) student integration theory. Astin's theory focused on the students and their level of engagement. Astin believed engaged students were more likely to be successful and persist. Whereas, Tinto (1993) believed the institution was responsible for providing a structured environment to make the students feel integrated. Tinto's theory was based on the premise that students voluntarily withdraw from an institution when their academic or social needs are not being met. Tinto's (1993) student integration theory had two systems, academic and social, and each system had a formal and informal structure. The formal academic system was the classroom environment and connected students to the content and information being taught (Tinto, 1993). The informal academic system consisted of the interactions students had with faculty outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1993). In the social system, the formal system consisted of clubs and activities with the informal system being social interactions between students (Tinto, 1993).

Student success courses provide an environment for students to engage with the institution and their peers. Through student success courses, students can develop their information networks, which have been associated with strengthening the student's connection to both the academic and social systems of the institution (Karp et al., 2010). Karp et al. stated the "three benefits of information networks—campus connections, social contact, and personal

resources—encourage students to feel connected to the college” (p. 80). The information networks are established within an academic system. Through the student success course, these relationships strengthen and expand to the social system (Karp et al., 2010).

This study focused on Smart Start, an orientation program, to determine what impact, if any, the program had on student integration to determine how the course influenced the decision to return the following semester. Understanding the benefits that student success courses provide, SPC uses some of the primary features of the course in Smart Start including resources, supports on campus, rules and policies, career decision making, and academic planning. This qualitative study gathered the student perspective on whether these orientation program activities helped them become engaged and feel integrated into the college, and ultimately attend the following semester.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Smart Start is exclusive to SPC. Therefore, this study was conducted at only one institution. The study was limited to first-time college students who took and completed Smart Start.

### **Basic Assumptions**

Smart Start has a standard course design. Therefore, the researcher assumed all Smart Start courses, regardless of the instructor, were facilitated in a similar manner. It was also assumed students who participated in this study would actively engage with the research questions and provide detailed and accurate accounts of what they experienced.

### **Significance**

According to Mayo (2013), a required first-year orientation program that provides the foundations for in- and out-of-class support increases retention rates and ultimately persistence to

graduation. In student success courses, students learn about resources and develop their information networks, leading to academic and social integration (Karp et al., 2010). Since student success courses were no longer required, an orientation program was one strategy that needed to be explored. The orientation program would allow students to have a designated place to establish these formal and informal social connections. During the orientation, students engage with academic supports (e.g., learning support, career, academic planning), and social supports (e.g., student life, engagement in the classroom). The results of this study were beneficial to administrators at community colleges because they heard the students' perspectives on the impacts of orientation activities in getting them engaged, making them feel integrated into the college, and persisting to the next semester.

### **Definition of Terms**

- *Associates in arts*: A 2-year, 60 credit-hour program intended to use to transfer into a bachelor's degree program (Florida Department of Education, n.d.).
- *Associates in science*: A technical degree program geared toward workforce programs. It typically includes 15-18 credits of academic coursework that can be used for transfer (Florida Department of Education, n.d.).
- *Career and academic advisors*: An advisor at SPC (St. Petersburg College, n.d.a)
- *Certificates*: Short-term programs for students to gain skills for the workforce (Florida Department of Education, n.d.).
- *Developmental education*: Remedial non-credit coursework that prepares students for college-level classes (Hu et al., 2014).
- *First-time college*: Students who have no prior college-level coursework (Florida Department of Education, n.d.).

- *Information networks*: “Social ties that facilitate the transfer of institutional knowledge and procedures” (Karp et al., 2010, p. 76).
- *Open access*: An institution that practices a non-selective admissions process (Doyle, 2010).
- *Orientation*: “Designed to acclimate students to the campus environment and allow them the opportunity to meet other students, faculty, and administrators” (Derby & Smith, 2004, p. 766).
- *Performance-based funding*: “Budgeting was designed as a way to focus government on results, with monetary incentives for agencies that meet their performance goals” (Florida Department of Education, n.d.).
- *Placement test*: A test that helps determine a student’s course placement level in reading, writing, and math (St. Petersburg College, n.d.b).
- *Persistence*: For the purpose of this study, persistence was defined as students returning the following semester. Retention and persistence are often used interchangeably in sourced content.
- *Retention*: The Florida College System (2017) defined retention as “students who enroll in two consecutive fall terms” (p. 1).
- *State college*: An institution in Florida that offers certificates, associates in arts, associates in sciences, and bachelor’s degree programs.
- *Smart start*: A free, non-credit course required for first-time SPC students (St. Petersburg College, n.d.c).
- *Student success course*: A course that “aims to help new college students learn about the institution and how to be successful there” (O’Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009, p. 195).

## **Conclusion**

Orientations are introductory sessions that help bridge the gap between high school and college. The purpose of orientation is to make students familiar with the tools and resources at the college. Student success courses go a step further. These courses extend beyond orientation to review study skills, strategies for success, support structures, and career planning. Student success courses also provide students with the avenue to develop information networks (Karp et al., 2010). Prior to developmental education reform, all students at the study's site who tested into two or more developmental courses were required to take a student success course. After the passing of the legislation that exempted select students from developmental coursework, enrollment in the student success courses declined. This left students who enrolled in Florida colleges without knowledge of the resources. Colleges then had to rely solely on orientation programming. In 2015, SPC created Smart Start, an orientation program required for all new students. The program has a curriculum similar to that found in student success courses but in a compressed format. Using the student's perspective, this qualitative study focused on whether students thought orientation helped them feel integrated into the institution, engaged with resources, and persisted to the next semester. Chapter Two discusses the research surrounding orientation, student success programs, and the concept of information networks. In addition, both Astin's (1985) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1993) student integration theory are further defined.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of the study was to determine what impact, if any, orientation had on students feeling integrated into the institution and their decision to persist to the next semester. This review synthesized the literature in a comprehensive analysis. The following themes emerged in the literature review: characteristics of community college students, the importance of retention, using orientation as a retention tool, and student engagement. This analysis reviewed these themes to establish an understanding of what the literature revealed.

#### **Characteristics of Community College Students**

Community colleges are open-access institutions without admission criteria and are less expensive than universities. The ease and accessibility of open access education attracts a variety of students, mostly those who are both economically and academically underprepared compared to their university counterparts (O’Gara et al., 2009). Zeidenberg et al. (2007) cited that in the fall of 2000, 42% of students who entered community colleges as first-time college students were required to take one or more remedial courses, compared to 20% who were admitted to a four-year institution (p. 1). Nine years later, Bailey and Jaggars (2016) reported 75% of first-time college students who enrolled in community colleges were deemed academically underprepared for college-level coursework (p. 1).

Aside from the lack of academic preparedness, community college students often work and have family responsibilities (O’Gara et al., 2009). These factors inhibit the student from being actively engaged on campus leading to limited interactions with their peers and instructors (Crisp & Taggart, 2013). Many community college students are first generation (Crissman Ishler, 2005). With no frame of reference on how to engage with faculty or how to navigate tools and

resources, students often are confused and turn to their friends for guidance (Karp & Bork, 2012). Students who transition straight from high school to community colleges have been familiar with frequent feedback and a structured environment and have been left wondering how to navigate a fluid structure and create their own homework and study schedule (Karp & Bork, 2012). Whereas, older students in the workforce and attending college for the first time have different challenges. Older students are familiar with the workforce, concrete job-related assignments, and frequent feedback from their supervisors (Karp & Bork, 2012). College requires a new set of skills that can be complex and confusing. Without a strong start to college and a channel to understand the new role, new technology, and new expectations, the college environment can become overwhelming.

In 2012, Crisp and Taggart (2013) noted only 50% of first-time community college students persisted to their second year (p. 114). According to Cox (2009) “around half of all first-time, first semester students and just under half of all undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges” (p. 4). Community colleges are open-access institutions; they cannot pick their students and need to understand that not all students will be college-ready. Duggan and Williams (2010) cited 45% of community college students do not persist to degree completion (p. 122). Because of this, community colleges are strategizing to find ways to reduce this figure, one being to use orientation as a retention tool.

### **Importance of Retention**

Community college students have conflicting priorities, making it difficult for them to maintain their commitment to getting a degree. Some may wonder why there is an increased emphasis placed on improving student retention year after year. One reason is that schools want to see their students succeed; another is because of funding.

## **Developmental Education Reform**

In Florida, two recent pieces of legislation have involved retention and funding. In 2013, the Florida Legislature passed Senate Bill 1720, also known as developmental education reform. The new legislation exempted students who graduated from a Florida public high school in 2007 or later with a standard high school diploma from taking the college placement test (Park, Tandberg, Hu, & Hankerson, 2016). Bailey and Cho (2010) discussed that one of the reasons why developmental students lagged behind was because of the time it took to complete remedial courses, especially for students who were required to enroll in multiple levels and subjects. Students exempt from developmental education were then free to choose to take developmental coursework or enroll in college-level courses. At SPC, the results have been significant for students who declined developmental education recommendations. In spring 2016, the attrition rates for students who declined recommendations and enrolled in college-level math were 59% and 47% for students who declined writing recommendations and enrolled directly into Composition I (St. Petersburg College, 2016a). These numbers are significant because, in 2015, the Florida Legislature passed a performance-based funding model that included retention as a measure.

## **Performance-Based Funding**

The topic of funding started to emerge in research articles as far back as 2008. Jacobs and Archie (2008) cited that the Higher Education Act established an association between graduation rates and financial aid funding, and states were starting to look at institutions' retention and graduation rates. The increased attention on funding coupled with the low retention rates merged into a plan in Florida. In 2016, the Florida College System Performance-Based Incentive System was officially adopted into Florida's statute.



The Florida College System Performance-Based Incentive System measures colleges' productivity using four factors: retention rates, completion rates, job placement/continuing education rates, and entry-level wages for graduates (Measures, para. 3). Institutions are ranked on this criterion and placed in a gold, silver, bronze, or purple category (Model Point Summary, para. 2). Performance funding accounted for \$60 million, of which \$30 million came from funds the state historically allocated directly to the colleges (Investment & Allocations, para. 6). This funding is now in jeopardy depending on where the college falls in the ranking criteria. Two of the four criteria set within the model were retention and completion. Both measures have been challenging for community colleges with the population they serve.

### **Orientation as a Retention Tool**

According to a 2013 Center for Community College Student Engagement report, 97% of the colleges surveyed offered a form of orientation (p. 11), and 84% of the colleges offered a student success course (p. 17). However, only 60% of students participated in orientation (p. 11) and 20% in student success courses (p. 17). After reviewing the research for similarities between programs, the researcher concluded there is confusion in terms of the extant research. Orientation, student success course, and first-year seminar were all used interchangeably. The blending of terms made it difficult to distinguish the characteristics of the programs. For instance, in Duggan and Williams (2010), student success course was in the research study's title, but orientation was referenced throughout the research.

Whether the research referenced orientation, student success course, or first-year seminar there were minor differences in the program content. The content ranged from technology problem-solving, and critical thinking (Ewing-Cooper & Parker, 2013) to relationship issues and diversity issues (Duggan & Williams, 2010). The prominent content themes in the majority of

the programs were: reviewing campus policies and resources, developing an academic plan, career development, study skills, and creating a network.

### **Student Success Outcomes**

The terms student success course, orientation, and first-year seminar have been used interchangeably in the research, and it is difficult to identify the differences between the programs. Therefore, all research in this study was discussed under the umbrella of student success outcomes. Derby (2007) sampled 3,583 students at a public Midwestern rural community college who were first-years or transferred fewer than 15 credit hours. The results showed the degree completion for students who completed the orientation course was 72% higher than for those who did not (Derby, 2007, p. 888). Derby concluded orientation was a predictor for degree completion.

At a 2-year technical college, Ryan (2013) evaluated 14 sections of the first-year seminar course. In the experimental section, there were eight courses where students were required to meet with the instructor who also served as their advisor. Ryan concluded the students who were in the experimental courses earned higher GPAs (2.612 vs. 2.234) and were retained at a higher rate (65% vs. 40%) compared to the control group (pp. 132-133).

Ellis-O'Quinn (2012) studied orientation programs in community colleges in response to the lack of research in this area. The purpose of the study was to determine if there was a relationship between GPA and retention for students who completed an orientation course during their first semester of college compared to those who did not complete an orientation (Ellis-O'Quinn, 2012). The school required students to take orientation, but it was not required during the student's first semester. Ellis-O'Quinn concluded students who completed orientation during their first semester had higher GPAs, but the course did not impact retention.

O’Gara et al. (2009) interviewed 36 students from two urban community colleges who were randomly selected to participate in the study. Students who completed the course were more likely to use the campus tutoring center; 58% of students used it compared to 23% of the students who did not complete the course (O’Gara et al., 2009, p. 210). The researchers discussed that students who did not take the course their first semester did not see the benefit of the course (O’Gara et al., 2009). The results from this study showed the significance of requiring students to complete an orientation or student success course during their first semester to learn about campus resources.

While variables were not consistent across all research, the outcomes had the same message. These courses intended to prepare students for college and help with both student retention and GPA. There were two areas not covered by the research; the first was whether the course should be mandatory during the student’s first semester. The second area that was not fully covered was whether the length of the course impacted retention. The research that did mention the course duration stated the courses were in variable formats with most being a semester long.

### **Research Suggest Student Success Courses**

At the conclusion of O’Gara et al.’s (2009) study, the researchers proposed all colleges should make student success courses a degree requirement. Acevedo-Gil and Zerquera (2016) agreed with these recommendations and stated these programs should include engagement activities and skill building. Mayo (2013) was more specific and believed first-year programs should consist of both academic and non-academic components. Both of which were seen in the studies on student success and orientation programs. Other vital components included student-to-

student and faculty-to-student interaction, engagement in campus activities, and academic preparation (Mayo, 2013).

### **Student Integration and Engagement**

Cox (2009) stated, “the dominant view of student success in the four-year college context suggests that student engagement or involvement during the first year of college is a determining factor in the rate of persistence” (p. 129). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2010) described student engagement in two parts. The first component was the students’ input in their time and effort to get involved in extracurricular activities, participating in college experiences, and time spent on their academic studies (Kuh et al., 2010). The second component was institutional. Institutions needed to create opportunities for experiences that allowed students to be engaged (Kuh et al., 2010). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) described persistence as connected to student involvement in both the academic and social systems of the institution.

Bean and Metzner (1985) conducted a study investigating the attrition rate of non-traditional students, defined as students who are older, part-time, and commute to the institution. Bean and Metzner found non-traditional students were not interested in the social component of college outside of the classroom, and therefore, were less socially integrated. Bean and Metzner concluded social integration that comes from engagement outside of the classroom is not a persistence indicator for two-year commuter college students.

O’Gara et al. (2009) studied the impact of student success courses on retention. The student success course provided students with information and access to college resources, which were otherwise spread out, and at times, difficult to find. This included visits from college departments, campus tours, registration assistance, and career exploration. The course gave students an opportunity to develop social relationships with their peers and their faculty member.

O’Gara et al. (2009) placed importance on students being aware of academic resources, knowing how to access them, and feeling comfortable using them. The researchers found “the personal contact that came from the visit of the tutoring center’s personnel to the student success course made students feel comfortable visiting tutoring later on” (p. 211). Based on the benefits the student success course offered, O’Gara et al. (2009) suggested all institutions should require students to take a student success course during their first semester.

A year later, Karp et al. (2010) set out to determine how college students engaged with their college. Bean and Metzner (1985) concluded social integration outside of the classroom did not impact the persistence of non-traditional two-year students. Karp et al. (2010) explained the prevailing assumption was that the more effort the institution put into developing opportunities for the students to become engaged in the institution then the more likely students felt connected to the college and continued to the next semester. The researchers interviewed 44 students at 2 separate community colleges and found 70% of the students they interviewed felt integrated into the institution (Karp et al., 2010, p. 75). Karp et al. found that, of the 70% who felt connected to the institution, 90% of those students continued to the next semester (Karp et al., 2010, p. 75). The researchers found that the students who felt integrated into the institution developed information networks consisting of relationships with peers, staff, and faculty members. The researchers pointed out that when students “learned about their campus through social relationships, rather than printed materials or other forms of information, they reported feeling more comfortable actually using the resource” (p. 77). Karp et al. (2010) explained the information networks emerged through academic contact. Students in the study developed many of their information networks in their student success course (Karp et al., 2010). The study also exposed that being engaged in clubs and activities did not automatically lead to integration (Karp

et al., 2010). Karp et al. (2010) concluded social and academic integration were interconnected for community college students. Students develop academic relationships that lead to social relationships, which integrate students both socially and academically into the institution.

In the same year, Borglum and Kubala (2010) conducted a similar study. The researchers surveyed 462 second-semester, community college students to determine if students who were socially and academically integrated were more likely to persist (Borglum & Kubala, 2010). The researchers concluded social and academic integration were connected (Borglum & Kubala, 2010). Students did not want to spend more time on campus because they had other responsibilities (Borglum & Kubala, 2010). Even though the students surveyed did not engage in on-campus activities, they still felt academically and socially integrated into the college (Borglum & Kubala, 2010).

### **Contradictions in the Literature**

The majority of the research presented confirmed a positive relationship between orientation and student success outcomes such as retention, higher GPAs, and engagement in resources. In the research, there were two outliers. Crisp and Taggart (2013) concluded their research was inconsistent and could not prove student success courses had any impact on student outcomes. Ellis-O'Quinn's (2012) study had a similar conclusion when studying 1,396 first-time students who took an orientation course. Ellis-O'Quinn reported orientation did not impact student persistence to the next semester. However, the orientation did impact the students' GPA during their first semester.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Higher education leaders have been searching for answers on how to retain students. Two theories that emerged were Astin's (1985) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1993) student

integration model. A new student orientation applies both theories. Astin's student involvement theory is rooted in the thought that the more students are engaged both socially and academically the more success they have (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). The terms *engagement* and *involvement* are often used interchangeably. Social engagement is when students are involved in extracurricular activities such as clubs and socializing with other students (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Whereas academic engagement is when students join peer study groups, complete homework, engage with professors, and participate in class (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Student success courses give students an opportunity to engage both academically and socially. As O'Gara et al. (2009) found, student success courses "enabled students to engage in small and large group discussions and complete assignments that focused on institutional services" (p. 205). Karp et al. (2010) credited student success classes with assisting students in creating an information network that acts as a conduit for both academic and social engagement. Students who are more academically involved have a higher chance of persisting (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). It aligns with the idea that the more time students invest in school, the higher the chance they will persist to graduation.

Approximately 10 years later, Tinto's (1993) student integration model emerged. Tinto shifted the attention from the students themselves to look at the institution to determine why students were not returning (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Tinto's model is based on the idea that students who feel integrated both socially and academically are more likely to persist (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Students need to feel like they belong. This is especially important in the students' first year when they are creating their identity as a college student (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Tinto's student integration theory has two systems, academic and social, and each system has a formal and informal structure. The formal academic system is the classroom environment

and connects students to the content and information being taught (Tinto, 1993). The informal academic system consists of the interactions students have with faculty outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1993). In the social system, the formal system consists of clubs and activities with the informal system being the social interactions between students (Tinto, 1993). As Karp et al. (2010) explained, student success courses provide students with the ability to create information networks. Karp et al. stated the “three benefits of information networks—campus connections, social contact, and personal resources—encourage students to feel connected to the college” (p. 80). In student success courses, students create their information network, thereby engaging and strengthening their academic and social systems. An example of network creation is when students must work in small groups on an assignment. This forced academic activity gives students the opportunity to forge relationships with other students (Karp et al., 2010). The assignment the student works on is within the formal academic system. This formal academic system leads to building an informal social structure. Karp et al. stated these relationships “provided information about course assignments, professors, and graduation requirements” (p. 78). The connections that emerged from a formal academic structure transitioned into an informal social structure providing students with a support system (Karp et al., 2010). Student success courses often incorporate a tour to highlight campus resources and guest speakers. These structured activities give students the ability to feel comfortable seeking assistance because they know where to go and to whom to speak (Karp et al., 2010). Last, student success courses give students a faculty contact that can be “a resource for guidance and support” (Karp et al., 2010, p. 82). Tinto (1993) separated the academic and social structures. However, for community college students who took a student success course, the separation between the two systems was



not as defined. Instead, the social system grows from the academic system in the form of information networks, and that is what helps students feel integrated into the institution.

Both Astin's (1985) and Tinto's (1993) theories have been part of the conversation about retention. Astin's student involvement theory places the responsibility on the student and how much effort the student is exercising to be engaged in both social and academic activities. Tinto's student integration model places the responsibility on the institution. Tinto challenges the institution to make the student feel like he or she belongs and create opportunities for the student. Both Astin's and Tinto's frameworks were focused on university students. Researchers such as Bean and Metzner (1985), O'Gara et al. (2009), Karp et al. (2010), and Borglum and Kubala (2010) applied these theories to recent studies at community colleges. Bean and Metzner (1985) concluded the social integration that comes from engagement outside of the classroom does not impact a non-traditional student's decision to persist. O'Gara et al. (2009) explained that students who completed student success courses were more likely to engage in using academic resources. Karp et al. (2010) introduced the idea that academic and social integration were interconnected. Students who developed academic relationships and information networks in their student success course expanded those relationships into both social and academic networks while students who were engaged in on-campus activities did not automatically persist to the next semester. Borglum and Kubala (2010) agreed with this finding and stated that community college students are focused on their academic work. Therefore, they do not want to engage in social activities; instead, the academic and social engagement are interrelated (Borglum & Kubala, 2010).

This study focused on the institution's input of structured activities to integrate the student academically and socially into the institution. Karp et al. (2010) stated "the underlying

assumption is that if colleges provide enough structured opportunities for students to engage with the institution, students will become integrated into the college and persist at higher rates” (p. 72). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stated that studies using Astin’s student involvement theory “attempt to explain the impacts of environmental influences...on student change or growth, focusing on factors over which college faculty and administrators have some programmatic and policy control” (p. 53). Whereas, Tinto’s (1993) student integration theory provides guidance to “researchers who wish to study the college student change process and to administrators who seek to design academic and social programs and experiences intended to promote student’s educational growth” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 56). Therefore, both Astin’s student involvement theory and Tinto’s student integration theory were used to explore the impacts of student engagement and student integration on students who completed orientation. Success of such programming is evaluated using the metric of persistence.

O’Gara et al. (2009) made the argument that student success courses help students learn about and feel comfortable using the available resources at the college. This is important in getting students to feel academically connected to the institution. Karp et al. (2010) explained the students developed the information networks in their student success course. In Florida, the impacts of the developmental education reform reduced the number of students who enrolled in student success courses since it was no longer required. Understanding the benefits student success courses provide, SPC used some of the primary features of the course in its orientation program, Smart Start. The modules review learning resources, supports on campus, rules and policies, career decision making, and academic planning. This qualitative study focused on whether student’s thought Smart Start helped them feel integrated into the institution and persist to the next semester.

## **Conclusion**

Astin's (1985) and Tinto's (1993) theories set the groundwork for establishing the relationship between orientation or student success courses and retention. Combined, the two theories asserted both the student and the institution were responsible for student engagement. In this study, the institution was the primary focal point. When students were engaged both socially, and academically, they had a higher chance of persisting to graduation. Tinto (1993) suggested, "attention be given during the first year to the establishment of the conditions which foster the integration of students into the intellectual and social life of the institution" (p. 175). Orientation and student success courses are one way to get students engaged. Traditionally, orientation programs are offered either prior to or during the student's first semester of classes. This is the time to introduce students to their resources, establish an academic plan, explore career options, and develop a network of support including other students and faculty members. These factors establish and maintain student engagement, and in turn, improve retention.

Retention has become a focus area in recent years in Florida. The Florida Legislature passed two pieces of legislation, the development of education reform in 2013 and performance-based funding in 2015. Development education reform exempts a select cohort of students from taking remedial courses and, as a result, student success courses. Students who enroll in a student success course without remediation increased their success rate by 9% (Zeidenberg et al., 2007). Both retention and degree completion are measures included in performance-based funding. With students entering the Florida College System unprepared and going straight into college-level coursework, college leaders need to find different ways to increase student retention and degree completion to maintain funding. Turning to Astin's (1985) and Tinto's (1993) theories, the answer may be engaging the student using orientation programs.

Using Astin's (1985) and Tinto's (1993) frameworks as a guide, this study evaluated an orientation program to determine the course's effectiveness on persistence. The study sought to capture the students' perceptions of whether the orientation program helped students feel integrated into the college. In addition, through the qualitative study, the students' insights on whether the orientation had an impact on them returning the following semester were exposed. This study assisted administrators in determining whether orientation could be used as a retention tool.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to determine what impacts, if any, orientation had on students feeling integrated into the institution and their decision to persist to the next semester. Zeidenberg et al. (2007) found the persistence rates increased by 7% for students who completed a student success course (p. 4). In fall 2014, prior to the launch of Smart Start, SPC students enrolled in a student success course had a 79% persistence rate (Business Intelligence, 2018). With the passage of developmental education reform, student success classes were no longer required for a significant portion of entering community college students in Florida. After the passage of this legislation, enrollment in student success classes at SPC declined by 43% (Business Intelligence, 2018). Therefore, college leaders needed to find other methods to impact persistence rates. Orientation programs are one- to two-day seminars that help students become acquainted with the college environment. Smart Start, created in 2015, is an orientation program that blends orientation programming and student success course content into a compressed format. In fall 2016, after the launch of Smart Start, the persistence rate for first-time college students not enrolled in a student success course but enrolled in Smart Start was 80% (Business Intelligence, 2018).

A case study design was used to explore Smart Start from the students' perspective to determine if they believed the course impacted their decision to return the next semester. Case study designs are helpful when research is focused on a program that is bounded by time (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Case studies are emic in nature and allow the researcher to "understand the situation under investigation from the participants'" perspective (Hancock &

Algozzine, 2017, p. 8). According to Hancock and Algozzine (2017), by using “quotes from key participants, anecdotes, narratives composed from original interviews, and other literary techniques to create mental images that bring to life the complexity of many variables inherent in the phenomenon being studied” (p. 16). The primary research question was what impact, if any, students perceived orientation had on their integration and their decision to return the following semester. This research examined student responses to the following questions:

1. What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate academically into the institution?
2. What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate socially into the institution?

Case studies are a type of qualitative research method. Merriam (2009) described “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). Smart Start was the case in this study. This study was an instrumental case study because “the intent of the case may be to understand a specific issue, problem or concern” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 98). The individuals in the case were not the subject of interest; instead, they were the means to understand the specific issue. In this study, the students who completed Smart Start informed the researcher about whether the program helped students feel integrated into the institution and impacted their decision to continue at the college. The students’ perspective was used to develop a greater understanding of the program and if it had an impact.

The conceptual framework for the study was guided by both Astin’s (1985) student involvement theory and Tinto’s (1993) student integration theory. Astin’s (1985) theory suggests that the more students are engaged, the more likely they will persist. Astin’s (1985) research was

focused on the students, their inputs, and their engagement. Tinto's (1993) theory placed the responsibility of persistence on the institution and believed students needed to feel academically and socially integrated. The conceptual framework also embedded the concept of information networks, which was uncovered during the literature review (Karp et al., 2010). These networks typically are established in student success courses. The research questions directly aligned with social and academic integration.

The literature review uncovered that prior research studies focused on orientation programs did not include the students' perspective on whether the program impacted their integration. This case study design relied on student interviews and their perspectives of Smart Start. The conceptual framework for the study was based on both Astin's (1985) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1993) student integration theory. Both of these theories were based on the idea that the more students were socially and academically integrated the more likely the students would persist. These theories were created with the university student in mind. Bean and Metzner (1985) found there was no significant relationship between social integration and persistence among community college students. Borglum and Kubala (2010) explained, for community college students, social and academic integration could not be thought of in silos. Instead, they were connected. Karp et al. (2010) agreed and found that academic integration led to social integration through the development of information networks. This research design was student-centered, so the researcher could "develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79). Yin (2018) described that the case study design should be explored when research questions are how and why questions, when there is no control over the behavior of the participants, and when the study is focused on current events. These three conditions were present in this study. Researchers should "want to do a case study

because you want to understand a real-world case and assume that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to your case” (Yin, 2018, p. 15). The in-depth nature of the case study design worked in tandem with the conceptual framework to guide the researcher to understand the students’ perspectives of whether the program helped them feel integrated both academically and socially to the institution. The research questions that focused specifically on integration uncovered whether Karp et al.’s (2010) idea of information networks appeared in the students’ dialogue.

This chapter describes the methodology of the case study to include the setting, participants, data collection, and analysis. Last, participants’ rights and limitations are discussed.

### **Setting**

The school selected for this study was SPC. The school was located in a densely populated area of the southeastern United States. SPC had eight primary campuses and served students online. In the 2016 academic year, SPC served approximately 44,000 credit-seeking students (St. Petersburg College, 2016a). SPC was accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and offered certificate, associates in arts, associates in science, and bachelor’s degree programs. In the fall of 2016, 72.4% of students were part-time and earned an average of 7.5 credits (St. Petersburg College, 2016b, para. 6).

SPC is 1 of 28 state colleges in the state college system. Retention is a primary concern for the state college system. In 2015, the Florida Legislature passed performance-based funding with retention rates as one measure (Florida College System, n.d., para. 3). Colleges must compete for a portion of state funding. Student success classes have been shown to increase student persistence, but classes had declining enrollment due to developmental education reform. Smart Start is a unique program to SPC. The program was created in 2015 in response to



declining participation in orientation. This free, non-credit course mirrored some of the same content as a student success course. The participants in the study were students who completed Smart Start at SPC.

### **Participants**

Merriam (2009) described that the most popular sample method for qualitative research is nonprobability sampling in the form of purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling “is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). Smart Start has been required for all new to SPC students, which includes both first-time college and transfer students.

### **Selection Criteria**

There have been 21,729 students who have taken Smart Start since fall 2015. This study focused on the first-time college student population and their perceived engagement and integration as a result of Smart Start. The researcher wanted to understand whether Smart Start had an impact on first-time college students. Therefore, transfer students were eliminated as potential research subjects. This limited the potential sample population to 11,867 students who were classified as first-time college students at the time they were enrolled in Smart Start. Smart Start was offered in multiple formats and modalities. For the purpose of this study, only students who completed Smart Start face-to-face were included in the sample. During the face-to-face Smart Start courses, students had the ability to develop their information networks and become exposed to on-campus resources. Online students have a different set of integration barriers that were not addressed during this study. These selection criteria limited the sample further to 10,349 first-time college students who completed a face-to-face Smart Start course.

## **Sample Size**

The in-depth nature of a case study design lent itself to this small sample population. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, “the study of more than one case dilutes the overall analysis; the more cases and individual studies, the less the depth in any single case can be” (p. 102). Therefore, “researchers typically choose no more than four to five cases” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 102). Creswell (2015) explained, “the larger number of cases, can become unwieldy and result in superficial perspectives” (p. 208). Robinson (2014) agreed with this assessment and stated “interview research that has an idiographic aim typically seeks a sample size that is sufficiently small for individual cases to have a locatable voice within the study, and for an intensive analysis of each case to be conducted” (p. 29). Robinson (2014) suggested a sample size of 3-16 participants. This researcher believed five participants may not have been large enough to understand the student experience amid the variables and diverse student experiences. Therefore, the researcher interviewed 9 participants. This did not align with Creswell and Poth’s (2018) recommendations but fell within Robinson’s (2014) suggestions.

## **Recruitment Process**

The researcher used the college’s business intelligence system to identify potential participants. The students received an invitation from the researcher asking if they were willing to participate in the research study. The invitation was sent to each student’s secured school email address. Within the invitation, there was a brief description of the study and the researcher’s contact information. Additional recruitment occurred on campus in the form of asking students if they met the study’s criteria and if they would like to participate in the study. The researcher intended to interview between 8-10 students and 9 students participated in the study.

### **Data Collection**

The primary form of data collection was through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the participants. Merriam (2009) stated “interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 88). The semi-structured interview process allowed the researcher to prepare questions that were open-ended to get the information needed to answer the researcher questions. In semi-structured interviews “the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of questions is determined ahead of time” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). This format helped put the participants at ease and feel like they were engaging in a conversation rather than a formal interview. The flexible format allowed “the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). Interviews took place in a meeting room or another quiet area. The goal was for the participants to feel comfortable with the interviewer and to eliminate noise and distractions.

Prior to the interview, participants were given a consent form to sign. The consent form included the participant’s rights. The interviews were recorded using the Rev Voice Recorder app for Android. The researcher also took notes throughout the interview using paper and pen. The notes helped the researcher capture key thoughts and helped spur additional questions throughout the interview. The voice recordings were sent electronically through the Rev Voice Recorder app for transcription.

After receiving the transcribed files, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and emailed the Microsoft Word files to participants to confirm the data were correct. Participants had a chance to review the transcripts for accuracy and provide additional clarification. This limited

the possibility for misinterpretation. (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) described this process as member checking. During this process, participants could choose to delete any portion of their transcript if they were uncomfortable with what was shared during the interview.

In case study designs, the researcher “is the primary method of data collection and analysis” and “interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their observations and interviews” (Merriam, 2009, p. 214). To establish reliability, the researcher focused on whether “the results make sense—they are consistent and dependable” (Merriam, 2009, p. 221). Merriam (2009) described “the question then is not whether findings will be found again but whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (p. 221). Triangulation was used to increase the credibility and validity of the study (Merriam, 2009). Triangulation is the process of using multiple methods of data collection such as reviewing documentation in addition to conducting interviews (Merriam, 2009). The data were triangulated using multiple data sources. The primary data collection method was interviews. Case study research methods also suggest the researcher collects documents of the case (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher obtained the Smart Start syllabus to review the course outline and content that was covered. This helped the researcher understand the terminology the student used that was related to the course, the course format, and assignments. Students also completed a five-question survey at the end of the course. The survey evaluated whether the students thought the program was a good use of their time, whether they would recommend it to others, and how happy they were with the content and detail of the information presented. The students choose either yes or no for each question. The last question asked if the college should add anything to the program. This question was open-ended. The researcher used the answers to the survey, and the syllabi to establish triangulation and reduce researcher bias.

### **Analysis**

Yin (2018) described “unlike statistical analysis, there are few fixed formulas or cookbook recipes to use as guides” (p. 165) for case study analysis. The data analysis process followed Creswell and Poth’s (2018) data analysis spiral. Once the transcripts were approved by the participants, the researcher organized the data and read the transcripts and text (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During this process, the researcher made “margin notes, and form[ed] initial codes” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 199). The researcher reviewed the codes to “build detailed descriptions, apply codes, develop themes or dimensions, and provide an interpretation in light of their own views or views of perspectives in the literature” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 189). The next step in the process was to develop and assess interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Last, the researcher created a visual representation of the data.

### **Participant Rights**

Participation in the interview was voluntary, and participants could choose to stop participating at any time. During the interview, participants could choose to answer or skip questions as they deemed appropriate. Participants were informed of the study’s purpose, the sample population included in the study, and how their data would be used prior to providing their signature for consent. Prior to the start of the interview, the researcher reviewed that there were no associated risks to participating in the study. To protect the participant’s privacy, every participant was assigned a number. This was explained to the participants prior to the interview. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcript for any misrepresentations. During the review process, participants were given the ability to delete any portion of their transcript if they decided they were uncomfortable sharing specific things they mentioned in the interview. The researcher saved research files using the number given to each participant. The

research files were saved in a password-protected home office computer. Voice files that were developed during the interview process were destroyed once the transcription was completed and verified.

### **Potential Limitations**

The researcher's role at the college might have been a limitation to the study. The researcher was part of a committee that evaluated the Smart Start program and was periodically asked to review the program for content updates. The triangulation process contributed to managing researcher bias.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to determine how orientation impacts students' feeling integrated into the institution and their decision to persist to the next semester. This qualitative case study focused on understanding the students' perspective of whether the different components of orientation helped them feel more integrated into the college and whether orientation impacted their decision to return the subsequent semester. Therefore, the researcher examined student responses from the following questions:

1. What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate academically into the institution?
2. What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate socially into the institution?

The researcher interviewed nine students who completed the orientation program. The semi-structured interview questions were developed based on Astin's (1985) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1993) student integration theory. The study divided the orientation subjects and resources into two categories: academic and social. The subjects of the course were each discussed in turn. This chapter provides a detailed description of the research findings. This includes the data analysis method, codes, themes, and interview results.

#### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process was guided by Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral. The process included reviewing the course syllabus and conducting one-on-one interviews with nine participants. After the interviews, the voice files were transcribed, and participants received

the transcripts for member checking. This section reviews the analysis of the student satisfaction surveys and the coding and theming process.

### Student Satisfaction Surveys

The student satisfaction survey was voluntary and anonymous. So, it could not be determined whether the student took the course face-to-face or online and whether he or she was a first-time college or a transfer student. The survey results span from Fall 2015 to Spring 2018 and participation varied by question. The survey consisted of two yes/no questions, two Likert scale questions, and an open-ended question asking students if the school should add any topics to the course.

Table 1

#### *Smart Start Student Satisfaction Yes/No Survey Responses*

Question	Yes	No
Was the Smart Start program a valuable use of your time?	8,007 (79%)	2,170 (21%)
Would you recommend Smart Start to a friend or family member?	7,769 (76%)	2,408 (24%)

Table 2

#### *Smart Start Student Satisfaction Survey Likert Responses*

Question	1 (not happy)	2	3	4	5 (very happy)
How happy were you with the information presented?	470 (1%)	1,644 (4%)	6,261 (16%)	10,312 (26%)	21,100 (53%)
How happy were you with the detail of information presented?	473 (1%)	1,572 (4%)	5,727 (14%)	9,832 (24%)	22,755 (56%)

Overall, the majority of students thought orientation was both a good use of their time and they would recommend the program to their family and friends. Students were also pleased



with the delivery of the content and the detail of the information. There was no substantial information gained from the open-ended questions.

### Coding and Theme Development

Bloomberg and Volpe's (2012) roadmap for the process of qualitative data analysis guided the coding process. During the coding in vivo, codes were used to maintain the students' perspectives during the data analysis process. Using the setup charts Bloomberg and Volpe provided (2012), Microsoft Word and Excel were used for the coding and theming process in place of using computer software. The codes were combined and collapsed, and themes emerged.

Table 3

Codes and themes by research question

RQ 1: What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate academically into the institution?		
Theme	Subtheme	Codes
Familiar with Resources	Academic technology	MyCourses, important, helped navigate, trial and error, sample, assignments, email
	Tour	Explore, resources, helpful
	Learning support	Tutoring, comfortable, friendly, would have not known about it
	Career services	Focus 2, clarification, comfortable
	Academic planning	Planning, goal, guide, tool
Similar to a class	Using advisor as a resource	Guru, advisor answers questions, advice
	Interaction with faculty	Communication, professor, first impression, helpful
	Eased fears	Fear, sample class, introduction, intimidated, scary
RQ 2: What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate socially into the institution?		
Theme	Subtheme	Codes
Clubs and formal activities	Found out about events through calendar and flyers	Calendar, flyers, posters, food at events
	Club rush	Clubs, events, snowballed
Friends	Met in class	Class, same people
	Met in formalized activity	SGA, clubs

## **Presentation of Results**

The first research question directly aligned with Tinto's (1993) student integration theory and academic integration, and the second research question aligned with social integration. While not a formal interview question, it was also considered whether Karp et al.'s (2010) information networks emerged in the interviews. An interview question asked students what impacted their decision to enroll the following semester. The results discuss their answers. Last, the findings of the primary research question, what impact, if any, students perceive orientation had on their integration and their decision to return the following semester are summarized.

### **Academic Integration**

The first research question was: What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate academically into the institution? The primary themes that emerged were that students thought orientation helped them become familiar with resources and that it was very similar to a classroom environment and expectations. Both themes led participants to feel more comfortable with the academic environment.

**Theme 1: Familiar with resources.** The interview questions asked the students to discuss their experience and comfort level with the resources they learned about during orientation. These interview questions were to determine whether students felt integrated into the formal academic environment. The interview questions asked for information about the learning management system (MyCourses), career services, learning support, and academic planning. Overall, students thought orientation made them feel more comfortable using these resources. This is further divided into the subthemes.

***Subtheme 1: Academic technology.*** Students thought knowing the academic technology or learning management system was pertinent to being successful at the college. The students

explained that without orientation it would have been trial and error to try to navigate the system, which could have been detrimental to their success in their other courses. Many students did not see the platform before orientation. Courses at the college required students to be proficient in the learning management system, as this was the primary means for submitting assignments, taking quizzes, and interacting with the professor outside of class. One participant explained her orientation instructor spoke about the learning management system, MyCourses, and she “would’ve died without learning MyCourses because I could not navigate it. I’d never seen it before.” The orientation course was designed similar to a class and had a course shell in the learning management system. Orientations were held in a computer lab so students could follow along in the course with their MyCourses displayed on the computer. Students were required to submit assignments in MyCourses to pass orientation. Requiring students to interact with the learning management system in orientation helped students feel comfortable using the platform in a formal academic environment.

***Subtheme 2: Campus tour.*** The campus tour was very popular among the participants. Many of the codes that derived from the transcripts were explore, resources, and helpful. As a participant explained:

As a new student, I didn’t know. Well maybe eventually I would have found out it was there, but when faculty and staff of the college introduce you, it does something more than if you would have just figure[ed] it out yourself.

Participants viewed the tour as an informal introduction to the staff behind the resources. They knew how the process worked and felt more comfortable using the resource after the tour. The tour also helped them feel more comfortable navigating the college. As one participant explained, the tour was helpful because “it just gets scary, and you don’t want to really explore

much.” Knowing which door to open, how to sign in to see an advisor, or how the learning support process works made it less scary for participants to use the resources. They no longer felt like an outsider and were more likely to use the resources available to them. It also exposed the participants to the resources that are available. A participant explained that the tour:

Was one of the coolest things coming here. You think it is a small community college, it’s not going to have as many resources and being able to have that and get first-hand knowledge at the beginning was very helpful, because I’ve utilized those since.

Campus tours were not widely given outside of orientation. The college did not have regularly scheduled campus tours. Students would need to request a personalized tour if they wanted to get a first-hand look at the resources. Because the college was an open-access institution, many students did not request a college tour before applying.

***Subtheme 3: Learning support.*** Learning support was another subtheme that emerged. Participants used the words comfortable and friendly to describe learning support. One participant described he “started going to tutoring, if he [orientation instructor] wouldn’t of mentioned it, I probably wouldn’t of went.” Another participant echoed these sentiments and stated he went to learning support “because I heard about it from my teacher, but if I hadn’t heard about it, no and that would of sucked.” In orientation, students learn about the learning support center, their hours, and how the process works. The orientation class either visits the learning support center as part of the tour or a member from the learning support team visits the orientation course. Students benefit from the tour because they can see the tutoring center setup. The centers are in an open space with round tables. Each table is assigned a different level of math or writing. The tour reviews the process. The tutoring center gets crowded with many students needing help with their courses. The tour showed the students in the orientation that

tutoring was popular and it helps battle the negative perception of tutoring. Whether students went on the tour or had a person from learning support visit the orientation, students were exposed to the resources and had a contact person. This process made the students feel more comfortable using the resources and helped the student see it was socially acceptable to get academic help.

***Subtheme 4: Career services.*** An assignment in orientation was for students to complete a career assessment called Focus 2. Students took the career assessment and then a career services professional presented the career resources and interpreted the results of the assessment. The career center was also part of the campus tour. The interviews uncovered that not all participants utilized the career center after learning about it in their orientation course. Some of the participants thought they knew their major and did not need career assistance. The career and academic advisors reviewed the student's major and career goals during the onboarding process. By the time students took orientation, they either were confident in their decision on their major or needed substantial help in deciding what they wanted to do. The career center offered services for students throughout their program. Students could choose when they wanted to go to the career center and in what areas they would like assistance.

The participants expressed they were comfortable going to the career center if they thought they needed help. One participant explained she liked the Focus 2 assignment because "it actually introduced [to] me some jobs I didn't know existed. I knew what I wanted to study, but I just didn't know what my degree would warrant." Another participant described that he went back to the career center after their presentation "because they told us about the different resources like the different personality tests, the job placement kind of stuff, all those resources they have to help you figure out what you want to do, I've utilized." It is dependent on the

student whether he or she visits the career center, but all participants were aware of the resource, thought the presentation was helpful, and were comfortable asking the career center staff questions.

***Subtheme 5: Academic planning.*** Academic planning in this context refers to the student's My Learning Plan (MLP). In orientation, students were required to plan at least two terms. During the planning process, students received the academic pathway. The academic pathway was created with faculty and advisors and put the courses in the ideal order. The pathways took into account the toxic combination of classes and any prerequisites that were needed. The learning plan also assisted students with planning their graduation date and with registering for courses. Participants explained they liked the MLP because it was a useful planning tool to help them achieve their goals. One participant explained with the MLP:

You don't just enter the semester blindly, the courses are there and not only are the courses there, but the courses you need because there's a system here when you try to register, it will ask you if...it will say this course does not seem like it will go towards your AA, are you sure you want to register for this course.

A part of academic planning is to have a goal and to connect the student's goal to the coursework.

***Subtheme 6: Used advisor as a resource.*** Every participant mentioned advisors. Participants viewed their advisors as people whom they went to about classes and school in general. One participant described his advisor as a guru and stated:

They are like the guru in that area and they will always guide you the right way. So, when you go to them, then they will tell you what is right, what is wrong, and what you don't need to do, what you need to do, and what you need to be successful.

Students interact with advisors from the time they apply all the way to when they graduate. Advisors are often the first person the student interacts with when new to the college. Some students connected and established relationships with either their assigned advisors or the advisors who conducted their orientation. Regardless, advisors provide comfort during difficult times, are problem solvers, and students believe their advisors are their safety nets.

**Theme 2: Similar to a class.** Participants were asked questions during the interview to pinpoint whether they felt integrated into the informal academic system. These interview questions concentrated on students interacting with their professors outside of the classroom. Participants explained that they felt comfortable interacting with their professors in and out of the classroom because orientation was similar to a classroom environment and prepared them for the expectations in the classroom. The two subthemes that emerged were interaction with faculty and easing fears.

***Subtheme 1: Interaction with faculty.*** Participants thought orientation was a test drive. They felt comfortable interacting with their orientation instructors, and the classroom was set up similar to a credit course. The course had a syllabus and assignments. Students needed to upload their assignments in the learning management system to get credit. One participant explained that orientation made her feel:

More comfortable approaching professors because [orientation] was like my very first impression of college and I was just shocked by how helpful every person is. How happy they were with their job. You know how friendly they were I really got the feeling of like everyone is there to help you, and everyone wants to see you.

This perception transferred to the classroom and students felt encouraged to ask questions. As another participant explained, after orientation he felt comfortable interacting with professors because:

It was a very kind environment and you were kind of encouraged to do things and you were in an environment where it wasn't frowned upon. That was really nice and it really helped with that comfort level quite a bit.

Advisors teach orientation, and the environment is very informal and upbeat. Students are not often intimidated by advisors. Students are familiar with asking advisors questions. Many times, the student's orientation instructor is the same advisor who helped him or her register. So, a recognition or relationship has already started to form. Students see how easy it is to interact with their orientation instructors. Students started to understand the person who was teaching the content was not scary and was there to help them.

***Subtheme 2: Eased fears.*** Orientation made participants more comfortable in the college environment. They heard about college from their high school teachers, family, and friends, and built up a sense of fear about navigating and succeeding in college. Orientation eased their fears. One participant described through orientation that he:

Gained a better sense of what college is going to be like and I learned it's not something to fear and I can just relax and it'll be fine. It's not some big thing that they make it out to be when you're in high school.

Orientation also made the participants feel comfortable because they now knew their resources and where to go for help. A participant explained that orientation:



Helped a lot with the transition stage and maybe it didn't teach me everything I came across but it taught me okay, you can go to library resources, or you could go to an advisor, they're free. They come with the package. It's really an introduction basically.

In the same regard, orientation made the college feel small and something easily navigable. A participant stated that orientation:

Made it seem like the college was a lot smaller than we thought. When you're coming out of high school you think 'okay huge.' I have no idea where I'm going to get my question answered I have to go through like 500 people but when he [orientation instructor] went through everything it seemed pretty normal.

Overall, orientation helped students understand the cadence of college and provided them with a welcoming atmosphere that helped settle some of their nervous thoughts.

**Summary of academic integration.** Academic integration is not one experience. It has many different components. Participants credited orientation with helping them navigate the learning management system, which is essential to their success in college. The tour provided them with a glimpse of the location of the resources. Using the learning management system and making an academic plan are both requirements at the college. The students used the other resources available such as the career center and learning support because they felt welcomed. Orientation gave students awareness of the different resources. It was dependent on the student to use the resource. In the interviews, participants explained being exposed to the resources made them more comfortable with using them. Exposure is only one part. The environment is the other piece of the puzzle. The participants used the words comfortable, welcoming, and helpful throughout the interviews. It is not just that the resource is available. It is the environment, accessibility, and the people behind the resource that makes students want to engage.

## Social Integration

The second research question was: What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate socially into the institution? This research question directly aligned with Tinto's (1993) social integration. The themes that emerged for this question were clubs, formal activities, and friends.

**Theme 1: Clubs and formal activities.** In orientation, students are exposed to Student Life and Leadership, Student Government Association, and clubs. The planned college activities directly aligned with Tinto's (1993) formal social integration system. The interview questions asked participants if the knowledge of these extracurricular activities impacted their decision to become involved on campus. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged: calendars and flyers and club rush.

**Subtheme 1: Calendar and flyers.** Participants explained that orientation stressed, "it was really important to be involved on campus." The participants were thankful they were introduced to the different ways they could get involved on campus. Orientation also made students aware of the event calendars and flyers posted around campus. The calendars proved to be a great marketing tool and participants primarily used the calendars to learn about upcoming events. Participants explained they mostly attended events because of the free food. Additional factors that impacted their decision to attend were whether they had time and if the event directly related to their interests.

**Subtheme 2: Club rush.** At the beginning of every semester, the clubs on campus planned a club rush event. The event served as a recruitment opportunity for clubs. The participants explained the club rush event impacted their decision to get involved on campus. As one participant explained, the event is "the best because that's when all the clubs come out and

so you start thinking, ‘Oh, do I want to be part of student government or do I want to be part of science club or math club or whatever.’” The club rush event brought the concept of the clubs to life. Students promoted the various clubs to other students. This is where they saw what clubs aligned with their interests and where they felt like they belonged. Many participants also explained that once they got involved, it snowballed from there. One participant described how she first became involved in student government, “Early on, I went to [an] ice cream social by SGA. I just wanted ice cream but I ended up being part of SGA for the whole year.” The participant was probed to determine how that happened and she responded with “I got some ice cream and it was really good. All SGA and everything were just doing a little session and they were all welcoming and I thought this might be cool.” A different participant described his experience as first joining an environmental club because it aligned to his interest. The next semester he was part of the club and student government. The term snowballed came up in multiple interviews. Students who got involved in formalized activities tended to join other activities as well. At the college, some of the activities were closely aligned and had the same faculty or staff advisor who recruited the same students for multiple programs.

**Theme 2: Friends.** The study explored whether the informal social system impacted the participants’ integration. The informal social system consisted of the participants’ friends and informal social activities. The interview questions about the informal social system started by asking participants about where they met their college friends and had them describe the process of meeting friends at college. The two subthemes that emerged were participants met their friends in class and they met them through formalized activities.

**Subtheme 1: Met in class.** Participants explained it depended on the class whether they made friends. One participant stated, “It depends on the class. There are some classes you don’t

really know the person or know anyone in the class, but there's other where you get to know people." Another participant explained in some classes the other students were friendlier than others, so there was a greater chance for students to start talking to each other. Most participants explained they started noticing the same people in their classes once they got into courses that directly aligned with their major. One participant explained that is where she met her best friend. Another participant explained, "Once you're in your program, if you're not at the same speed you're around there, or you can make each other at the same speed. That is where I made friends the most." Additionally, once students were in their desired program, they had similar interests to the students in their courses making it easier to start a conversation. The participants mentioned other informal ways they met friends were through other friends and by hanging out in common areas on campus.

***Subtheme 2: Formalized activities.*** Participants also credited formalized activities as a place to make friends. Some of the most common places were either in clubs or student government. One participant explained, "Most of my friends I met through student government. I became friends with all of them and through them, I met some other people." These formalized activities required students to spend time together. Members of student government also took trips, went to leadership conferences, and collaborated on projects.

**Summary of social integration.** Orientation provided awareness of the clubs and the activities the college provided. Just like with the academic resources it was dependent on the student to engage. After orientation, participants often learned about events through the campus calendars. Many participants explained free food was the main reason they attended an event. Free food was always a selling point for college students, but it did not offer an opportunity for

social engagement. It was more about the number of students who attend the event rather than the quality of interaction.

Orientation did not provide the forum to make these social connections. The content was based heavily on the academic components rather than the social engagement. Orientation provided the students with the knowledge and resources to become involved. The majority of the participants were involved in a college activity or multiple activities. Extracurricular involvement tended to snowball, starting first with one activity and then allowing the student to branch out and get involved in other activities on campus. This is not always the case. The students who participated in the study wanted to be involved and were open to new experiences. The interviews uncovered that many of the social connections were a product of formalized social activities, meeting friends through mutual friends or on campus. The social interaction did not result from a formalized academic interaction. The social connections that occurred outside of the classroom would be difficult for students who had additional responsibilities other than college and were a traditional “car to class to car” student.

### **Information Networks**

Information networks include faculty, campus resources, and other students. The research questions did not include the concept of information networks, but the interview questions were designed for participants to describe their networks. Through the analysis process, the concept of information networks emerged, but the networks encompassed advisors and professors. In the interviews, students described that they did not necessarily rely on other students. Instead, professors and advisors were their primary point of contact.

**Theme 1: Professors.** Professors played a significant role in student integration. Participants appreciated the professors’ openness, as one participant mentioned, “Most

professors make it pretty clear that they are here to help you and they are available outside of office hours” and some professors gave out their cell phone numbers. This gesture surprised many participants. By giving out their cell number, it sent that message that the professors were accessible. Professors were also connecting with their students using Facebook. A participant in a specialized music program described one of her professors:

He’s a cool professor, because he’ll friend us on Facebook so we can message him about any questions we have on homework or just will share music videos and stuff because he loves learning about new music. Or, I remember, even last semester he called me on the messenger because he knew I couldn’t be at an event, and showed me the live recording that they were doing with the whole orchestra.

Many participants provided examples of when they had a personal connection with their professors. One participant described this connection, “My professor helped me out with so many papers, just you know outside of school hours and sometimes I would just go to her office, and I dropped off a card one time because she wasn’t feeling well.” Another participant described his connection with one of his professors and said, “For Christmas, he actually got me a suit, which was the first time anybody’s ever done something like that for me. . . . I still have the receipt and everything, and I still have the suit all covered up.” Professors make an impact on students’ perceptions of feeling connected to the college. A participant explained, “One professor last semester who was my ethics professor and just because I said good morning to him every morning, whenever I saw him in the hallway, he would say hello to me and, he knew my name.” While this example was more of a surface level connection compared to the others, it still was important. These examples describe a connection between the student and professor.

**Theme 2: Advisors.** Participants frequently mentioned using their advisors as a resource. One participant described that advisors, “have a good idea of you. If you visit them a lot, they know what type of teachers you need.” Participants repeated this sentiment throughout the interviews. Students trusted their advisors and their opinions. Many of the participants had what they called “their” advisor, an advisor they always went to when they needed school advice. One participant summed it up by saying their advisor, “is the person I always turn to.”

**Theme 3: Students.** Participants also referenced using other students as a resource. Professors promoted this concept. A participant described that her “speech professor, he actually said make [a] course friend, so if you do ever miss anything you can rely on them to pick up on what you missed.” When prompting participants to understand how this interaction worked, one participant described it as “You know [we] eventually just exchanged numbers and emails, and you kind of had a good group going.” Participants were asked where they found information about professors and which professors to take. The majority of participants said they spoke to their friends but they mostly utilized Rate My Professor. This was because they could get a wide range of perspectives, not just their friends. One student mentioned she took one less class that semester because the only professor who was teaching the class had a poor rating on Rate My Professor. The social network and resources appeared in smaller niche programs. One student who was in a niche program explained that her:

Major is obviously very small like literally there are less than 10 students in your classes . . . there’s only like a few of us, so we get to know everyone very well. So, we’re all friends on Facebook, and we follow each other and help each other out.

This only occurred in smaller programs. The majority of the participants were in general education programs and did not have this type of interaction with other students.

**Summary of information networks.** When asked whom they turned to for school advice, participants referenced professors, advisors, and other students. While other students were considered a resource, they were not the primary resource for many participants. Participants used other students for social interaction. They found other methods to get school-related information. Many participants did not miss a class, and if they did, they would either check the learning management system or ask their professor what they missed. Participants felt comfortable going to the professor or the tutoring center if they needed additional help in their course. Throughout the interviews, the participants mentioned they had a great relationship with their advisor and went to him or her for assistance. They also stressed the importance of speaking with their professors. Many of the participants had established a personal relationship with their professors and felt comfortable going to them for advice.

It was initially surprising that students did not place a stronger emphasis on their connections with other students. This is different from Karp et al.'s (2010) concept of information networks, but it aligns with the study's themes. Participants placed a great deal of emphasis on their professors and advisors throughout their interviews. Students viewed professors and advisors as the experts. The friendly environment provided them with the feeling that it was okay to ask questions. Students might question why they would go to someone who might not know the answer rather than going to the expert. The school's environment promoted students asking their advisors and professors for help. Therefore, they could rely on other students for social interaction.

### **Decision to Persist**

An interview question asked participants what impacted their decision to enroll the next semester. This question was essential for the researcher to understand from the student



perspective why they decided to return to this particular institution and whether orientation influenced their decision. This question was another way to determine if the participant's answers were consistent when not explicitly asked about the orientation program. The majority of the answers to the question were related to the college having friendly staff and providing a welcoming atmosphere. As one participant described, "You feel at home. It's small, and the people, they're not hard to reach." Another participant explained, "I was just hooked. Like after my first semester, I just wanted to come back." Participants also explained the cost and location impacted their decision to re-enroll at the college. As one participant stated, "Cost and it is also really convenient." The college's location is in an area that has multiple education institutions. While the cost may be lower than nearby colleges, there are other higher education options located nearby. When asked follow-up questions to determine why they chose this particular institution, participants responded by talking about the quality of professors and the resources the college provided. One participant described, "The professors, who are so kind and so willing to talk to you and invest in you outside of class." Participants believed they knew the college and described it as homey. A participant stated he reenrolled because "seeing that it wasn't difficult as I thought it would be, taking as many classes as I took because [of] the resources and everything. That made me keep going." Overall, the college's atmosphere, friendly staff, and the quality of instruction dominated the participants' responses.

### **Summary**

The primary research question for the qualitative case study was: What impact, if any, students perceived orientation had on their integration and their decision to return the following semester. The research question was influenced by Tinto's (1993) student integration theory, and therefore, was broken down into two parts, academic and social integration. Orientation exposed

students to the academic resources and social activities the college provided. It was dependent on the student to use those resources. The components found in academic integration were the primary focal point in orientation. The social aspects were reviewed but not applied. Many participants became socially integrated through other means such as formalized activities, meeting students through mutual friends, and hanging out on campus. One theme that kept reappearing through each area of analysis was the environment. The friendly staff made students feel comfortable asking questions and using the academic resources. The welcoming environment made participants feel comfortable getting involved on campus or interacting with other students on campus. The information networks were primarily composed of the friendly advisors and professors. Students wanted to return to the college because of the friendly staff, it was easy to use the resources, and it felt like home. The next chapter interprets the research findings, discusses the implications, and reviews the recommendations for further study.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to determine how orientation impacted students' feeling integrated into the institution and their decision to persist to the next semester. This qualitative case study used Astin's (1985) student involvement and Tinto's (1993) student integration theories as a conceptual framework to determine if orientation influenced a student's decision to persist. This chapter provides an interpretation of the findings and discusses the implications of the research along with recommendations for action and further study.

#### **Interpretation of Findings**

The primary research question for the qualitative case study was: What impact, if any, did the students' perceptions of orientation have on their integration and their decision to return the following semester? The research examined student responses from the following questions:

1. What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate academically into the institution?
2. What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate socially into the institution?

#### **Question 1: Academic Integration**

The first research question was: What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate academically into the institution? This question directly aligned with Tinto's (1993) formal and informal academic integration. The themes that emerged were that orientation helped students become familiar with the resources available and students thought orientation mirrored a classroom environment. The first theme presented was in response

to formal academic integration. The answers to this question uncovered that orientation exposed students to formal academic resources, which made them feel more comfortable using them. The participants explained that, without orientation, it might have taken them longer to discover the resources or they might not have encountered them at all. The campus tour helped students with navigating the campus and making participants feel more comfortable with exploring the campus.

The second theme addressed informal academic integration. Informal academic integration is whether students believe they can interact with their professor in an informal way outside of class. Orientation made students familiar with the college, and they experienced staff members who were friendly and open. They automatically assumed this carried over to the classroom, which made them believe their professors were approachable. The participants did not hesitate to ask their professors questions or approach them outside the classroom. Overall, orientation eased the participants' fears about college. Through orientation, they thought they were familiar with classroom expectations, the technology, and resources.

### **Question 2: Social Integration**

The second research question, what perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate socially into the institution, explored Tinto's (1993) theory of social integration. Interview questions were formatted to ask participants about their formal and informal social integration. The themes that emerged from this research question were clubs and formal activities, and friends. Overall, orientation provided awareness of the clubs and the activities available. However, their awareness did not directly impact their participation. Tinto (1993) believed it was the institution's responsibility to provide both formal and informal social integration opportunities. Orientation provided students with awareness. It was the student's

responsibility to decide to participate. Participants often approached other students and initiated an informal conversation if they saw the same student multiple times. This type of social interaction bodes well for the informal social integration. Students who participated in formalized activities integrated into the formal social system. The critical thing to note is that orientation did not impact these connections. The students explained they did not make friends in orientation. The students may have met friends in their other courses but only if it was a program-related course and not a general education requirement. The social system was dependent on the student participating, and some students were more active than others.

### **Information Networks**

Tinto's (1993) student integration theory was developed with the university student in mind, which prompted the theory to separate the social and academic components. Karp et al. (2010) found the theory also applied to community college students with a slight modification. Separating social and academic integration for the community college students was difficult because of their characteristics. Instead, the social and academic components were intertwined. Karp et al. (2010) explained that for community college students, the social integration derived from formal academic integration. Students made friends through formalized group activities that happened in the classroom. From there, students made a connection that turned into a resource and a social connection. Community college students have responsibilities outside of college, therefore, do not have the excess time to hang out on campus and make friends. Students meet friends through academic activities. These friends are then turned into social connections and become part of the student's information network that includes students, faculty, advisors, and additional resources. Information networks are the student's source for learning information about the campus, resources, and the go-to people to help them navigate through college. Karp et

al. (2010) explained that a student's information network typically forms in the student success class but the concept of information networks occurred in orientation and outside of the student success course.

Karp et al.'s (2010) information networks emerged in the interviews. However, information networks included advisors and professors with less emphasis on student interaction. In the interviews, students emphasized their connection to the advisor and other faculty members. They relied less on other students for information about resources. Participants explained they turned to a professor or advisor when they needed school-related advice. Participants did not rely on other students as their primary resource for information. Students thought advisors and professors gave the most accurate and complete advice. They felt comfortable using both as a resource. The dialogue with the participants uncovered that the social and academic components were not interrelated. Students said they mostly made their friends either on campus, through a formalized activity like student government, or through other friends. The only instances where friends were a result of the formal academic system was in small niche programs that were cohort-based or when they were further along in their program, and they had the same students in their class. Students described that they were friendly with their classmates but mainly did not interact with them outside of class. Overall, for the interview participants, the information network primarily consisted of the student's advisor and professors where they had established a relationship. Social integration did not derive from academic integration. Instead, social integration was present because of the students getting involved in formalized social activities and meeting friends through other means on campus such as hanging out in a common area between classes, through mutual friends, and clubs.

### **Decision to Persist**

The purpose of the study was to determine what impact, if any, orientation had on students feeling integrated into the institution and their decision to persist to the next semester. Through the research, the study documented what students perceived to be the reason they persisted. This spurred the researcher to ask students why they decided to reenroll semester after semester. Students replied with multiple reasons, and cost was one of them. The institution was a community college, therefore, more affordable than the nearby university. Students also replied that the location was convenient. The institution has multiple campuses that students could attend spread throughout the county. Participants were pressed further to try to understand why they decided to return to this particular institution. Students responded by saying the college offered a welcoming environment and some participants even went on to say the college was homey or felt like home. Everyone was friendly, and it was a smaller environment. The participants also referenced the quality of professors and how they were willing to speak to students. Another common answer provided by the participants was they returned because of the resources the college provided, such as tutoring. Last, the participants thought it was simply easy. They knew where everything was, and it was familiar and comfortable. Overall, the college's atmosphere, friendly staff, and the quality of instruction dominated the participants' responses.

### **Primary Research Question**

The primary research question was what impact, if any, students perceived orientation had on their integration and their decision to return the following semester. This question had two supporting research questions that directly aligned with Tinto's (1993) student academic and social integration. The interview data show orientation provided students with the academic resources to be successful at the institution. Orientation made them feel comfortable using the

resource and impacted their decision to use the resources available. Through the campus tour, students became familiar with learning resources and the career center. Within orientation, students learned how to use the student portal and learning management system. Students also created an academic plan. These activities led to students feeling comfortable using the resources they needed to be successful. Orientation was similar to a classroom environment. This eased the participants' fears. They learned how to communicate with their professors and classroom expectations. They learned how to submit an assignment and participate in discussion boards on line, which were intimidating course requirements to some. Orientation was a safe place where they could ask questions. Students thought orientation exposed them to a friendly college environment where staff welcomed questions. Many participants described that their orientation instructor paved the way for them feeling comfortable with their professors. The orientation instructor was open and accessible, so they automatically assumed their professor would be the same way making them more likely to contact their professors. This, in turn, helped them build relationships with their professors.

The second question aligned with Tinto's (1993) social integration. Orientation did not have as much of an impact on social integration as it did academic integration. Students learned about clubs, activities, and the ways to find events. Many students integrated socially into the institution using means beyond orientation. Students joined clubs or student government because of events on campus. Many students did not meet friends in orientation. They mentioned that most of their friends they met in college were a result of mutual friends, connecting with other students in formalized activities, or hanging out on campus. While orientation did not provide the environment for social integration, it did provide students with a friendly atmosphere, which could have led to students being more open to getting involved on campus. Students did not



indicate that it was difficult to make friends. It just happened through other means outside of orientation.

The participants provided a variety of reasons why they decided to reenroll at the college. The most common answers were because of the college's atmosphere, friendly staff, and the quality of instruction. If an interview question directly asked the participants the primary research question of what impact, if any, students' perceived orientation had on their integration and their decision to return the following semester, they would say that orientation did not impact their decision to return. While orientation did not provide the forum that led to social integration, orientation did provide elements of an environment that supported academic integration. Orientation influenced the academic integration of the students who participated in this study. In Tinto's (1993) theory, academic integration was just one part of the whole. Participants stated the reasons why they continually came back to the college were because of the atmosphere, friendly staff, and quality of instruction. Orientation provided one part of the whole, a space where students understood the college and made them feel comfortable. This potentially made them feel more open to other experiences that led to social integration. It would have been the student's decision on whether he or she socially integrated.

### **Implications**

The student satisfaction survey and the participants' answers aligned with the premise that participants thought orientation was a good use of their time and they valued the content. Throughout the interviews, the academic integration had a strong presence in the dialogue and in the themes that emerged. Students were thankful they were given the opportunity to learn about the academic resources and required systems and thought orientation was a safe place for learning about these resources. Orientation made them feel comfortable and relaxed in the

college environment. The participants stated they continue to reenroll because it was a friendly, accessible environment with high-quality professors.

Orientation was one of the first interactions students had with the college. It needed to create a comfortable and inviting environment where questions were encouraged. Tinto (1993) believed the student's first semester was the most crucial time for the student. Within the first semester, the student decided if he or she wanted to leave an institution. During the first semester, students must learn how to navigate through the college's rules and processes and develop social relationships. According to Karp and Bork (2012), the "students who do not have this knowledge—often referred to as college-readiness skills—are unlikely to be successful in college, even if they have the required academic skills" (p. 6). Through orientation, students feel a sense of belonging. As participants stated, orientation eased their fears about college. They learned about the processes, systems, and resources. It made them feel like they were on the same level as the rest of the student body and realized there was nothing to fear.

The primary purpose of this study was to determine whether orientation could impact a student's persistence. Community colleges are acutely aware of persistence numbers. The college's funding is directly related to student enrollment. Students wanted to feel like they belong to the college. Orientation helped students get comfortable. It allowed them to interact with the resources without judgment. The results of this study displayed that academic integration was critical to student success. The social component was not as critical, and students found a way to satisfy that need. Beyond academic integration, it was the friendly environment that made the difference. Students felt welcomed and that the college was their home. Colleges need to interview their students to understand how the students would describe the atmosphere.

Colleges leaders should consider these results and review their business practices to determine what needs to change.

Community colleges directly impact the community. The college has both transfer degree programs and ready to work degrees. Crisp and Taggart (2013) reported only 50% of first-time college students attending community colleges return their second year (p. 114). This level of attrition needs to change. Community colleges help students better their lives and their communities. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2014), “workers who have attended community college tend to earn higher incomes than workers with no postsecondary education; the accumulated earnings of community college-educated workers added an estimated \$800 billion to the national economy in 2012” (Contributions to a National Economy, para. 1). Community college students differ from university students and, many times, do not have the same opportunities. Orientation helped with role transition and showed them they belonged at college and there were people to help.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Orientation is a valuable component to the college experience. It is an introduction to the college and expectations. Many students have preconceived notions about college and orientation helps adjust these to reality. Therefore, community colleges need to make orientation mandatory for all new students. Students need to take an orientation course before the beginning of the semester to get the information they need for the first day of class. Orientation helps students get a strong start and become familiar with the resources they need to be successful. It is also the first step in introducing the student to the college environment, which is an essential aspect to student persistence.

Many participants credited the campus tour and orientation with making them comfortable with the college environment. The tour showed students where the resources were and how they worked. Community colleges need to include a tour in their orientations. Students need to know the cadence of the college to overcome their anxieties. Describing a resources without showing the resource and how it works could result in the student not feeling comfortable with getting the additional help they need.

In this study, academic integration dominated the conversation. Students wanted to feel comfortable. The academic components made students feel like they belonged and were at the same level as their peers. This included reviewing the academic technology requirements and classroom expectations. There needs to be time dedicated in the orientation where students can learn to use these resources in a hands-on setting and have the ability to ask questions. Orientation should be fun and welcome students to the college, but it also needs to give the students the resources they need. This part of the orientation should take place in a computer lab with a small number of students so they can get personalized attention if they have questions.

The data displayed that information networks were present. However, these information networks primarily consisted of advisors and professors. These two connections were important to participants. Community colleges should provide a conduit for students to form these relationships at the beginning. Therefore, community colleges should experiment with a co-teaching model and have both a professor and advisor teach orientation. Students would be able to see the value of both roles and learn how to interact with them. A co-teaching model would also strengthen the relationship between academic and student affairs, which are both critical to student success.

Last, students mentioned they did not make friends in their coursework until they were in their major. This was because there were always different students in their classes. The one student who was in a smaller niche program described that she made friends with students in her courses. Students did not socially integrate into the college because of orientation. They integrated because they took the initiative. The participants were able to find social connections outside of orientation, but the college should assist with providing an environment to form these connections outside of formalized activities. As participants explained, they started to make friends in the classes once they were in their major. This was either because they had the same courses or because they were able to connect based on common interest. Colleges need to prompt these connections earlier. Orientation should be organized based on major. This would help students connect with other students who have similar interest. This would help start the social integration process. Colleges should also experiment with prescribed schedules and cohorts. Cohorts would assure that students were taking a portion of their courses with the same students and help mimic the experience they receive once they get into their major.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study was based on a sample of nine students. The students also volunteered to be part of the study, meaning that they were already open to new experiences and felt comfortable speaking to strangers. Recommendations for future studies would be to have a larger sample size and include students who were not already engaged in the college to determine why. How would students not engaged in the college describe the environment compared to students who were involved?

The participants emphasized academic integration, but they were socially integrated as well. The analysis concluded that social integration was not as important as academic

integration. Additional studies could isolate the social and academic components and explore the impacts on integration if the orientation only included social activities. Would the students still use the academic resources available? Would the students feel differently about the college environment? Would they be more involved socially and struggle academically?

Student affairs staff traditionally teach orientation. What would happen if it were taught by staff in academic affairs? Would students be socially and academically integrated or would the emphasis be placed on academics? Would this differ in a co-teaching model? How does each model impact integration and persistence?

Last, students credited a friendly and welcoming environment as one of the main reasons they returned. Additional research could explore environmental factors. What are the factors that need to be presented for an environment to be friendly compared to a college that is unfriendly? Students who attend a college that they would describe as unfriendly, do they persist and if they do, what makes them return?

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to determine what impact, if any, orientation had on students feeling integrated into the institution and their decision to persist to the next semester. The conceptual framework focused on Tinto's (1993) student integration theory, which includes both academic and social integration. Beyond the initial research question, the researcher wanted to determine if Karp et al.'s (2010) information networks emerged. Last, participants were asked directly for the reasons they decided to return the following semester.

Orientation assisted students with the academic integration process. Orientation eased the participants' fears because they were able to become familiar with the resources and academic technology. Students also credited orientation for making them feel comfortable with the

resources and their instructor. The sense of comfort made the participants think the institution as a whole was a friendly environment making them feel at home. This feeling helped the participants explore and gave them the confidence to speak with professors and other staff. This led participants to become academically integrated into the college.

The social integration component did not occur as a result of orientation. Social integration was dependent on the student actively participating in formal and informal social activities. Orientation provided information on where they could find these types of experiences but did not provide a forum for students to make connections. The social component came in the form of formalized activities, making friends through mutual friends, and finding common interests through campus interactions.

Karp et al.'s (2010) information networks did emerge in the data. However, the information networks primarily consisted of advisors and professors and lacked other student involvement. Students felt comfortable with their professors and advisors and believed this was the only resource they needed. Friends and social connections were for social interactions and did not derive from academic activities. The social and academic integrations were separate components.

In answering the primary research question of what impact, if any, students perceived orientation had on their integration and their decision to return the following semester, students credited their academic integration to orientation. Their decision to return the following semester rested on a friendly college environment, access, and the quality of instruction. The environment made students feel comfortable using resources, asking questions, and becoming involved.

Colleges have the potential to change lives and provide students with economic mobility. The challenge is student persistence. Students want to feel academically connected to their

college. College leaders need to consider this and determine whether the institution is connecting students to the academic resources and providing opportunities for students to interact with their advisors and faculty. The college environment is an essential component for persistence. College leaders need to do an environmental scan to determine ways to make the college a comfortable and inviting space for students.



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## APPENDIX A

### Recruitment Email

Subject of Email: Help Improve SPC's Smart Start Orientation Course: Volunteer to Participate in a Quick Interview

Dear [Student],

My name is Kellie Ziemak and I am the Student Services Project Coordinator at St. Petersburg College. I am also a student just like you! I am in my third year of my doctoral program at the University of New England and in search of volunteers to participate in a quick interview for my study.

The purpose of the study is to determine what impact, if any, orientation had on students feeling connected to St. Petersburg College and their decision to return the next semester. I believe you could provide valuable input!

To learn more about your Smart Start experience, I would like to meet with you for a 30-45-minute conversation. I can meet you at the campus you select. The interview time is flexible.

Please respond to this email by XX if you are interested in providing input on how to improve Smart Start. The information you provide could potentially help future students.

Thank you for your consideration!

Kellie Ziemak

Ed.D. Candidate, University of New England

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions

#### Background Question:

1. Please select the age range that best applies to you?
  - a. 18
  - b. 19-21
  - c. 22-26
  - d. 27-35
  - e. 36-45
  - f. Over 45

#### Research Questions:

**What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate academically into the institution?**

1. What did you think after hearing about learning support in Smart Start?
  - What impact did the presentation/tour have on your comfort level with using learning support?
  - How did you utilize learning support during your first semester at SPC?
  - How did you utilize the library during your first semester at SPC?
  - How did Smart Start impact your decision on whether to attend a workshop?
2. Describe your experience with the learning plan assignment.
3. What did you think after hearing about the Career Center in Smart Start?



- What impact did the Career Center presentation/tour have on your comfort level with using the Career Center?
  - How did you utilize the Career Center during your first semester at SPC?
4. Tell me about a time where you interacted with a professor outside of class?
    - What knowledge did Smart Start give you on how to contact your professors outside of class?
    - How did Smart Start impact your comfort level in interacting with your professors?
  5. How did you learn about MyCourses?
  6. How did you learn about MySPC?

**What perceptions, if any, do students have about orientation helping them integrate socially into the institution?**

7. How did the knowledge of events, clubs, and activities impact your participation?
8. Tell me about the interactions you had with other students as a result of Smart Start?
9. Describe your interaction with your classmates outside of Smart Start?
  - Did you meet any of them in Smart Start?
10. Who do you get school advice from?
  - Where do you get your information regarding class assignments, your major, events, which classes to take or which professors to take?
11. How would you describe your sense of belonging at SPC?

**General questions**

12. What do you feel like you gained or learned from Smart Start?
13. What impacted your decision to enroll the next semester?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## APPENDIX C

## Consent Form

**UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND  
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH**

**Project Title:** *INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORIENTATION AND PERSISTENCE*

**Principal Investigator(s):** Kellie Ziemak, Graduate Student, University of New England, kziemak@une.edu (email), and 813-767-6442 (phone)

**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. William Boozang, University of New England, wboozang@une.edu (email), and 508-446-7685

**Introduction:****General requirement language:**

- Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

**Why is this study being done?**

- The purpose of the study is to determine what impact, if any, orientation had on students feeling integrated into the institution and their decision to persist to the next semester.

**Who will be in this study?**

- The participants in the study are students who completed a Smart Start course face-to-face as first-time college students.
- You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.
- 8-10 students will be interviewed for this study.

**What will I be asked to do?**

- The researcher will email all eligible students using their school issued email to participate in the study. Students will be asked to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. This interview format will allow the researcher to be flexible with the questions and order of how the questions are asked. The researcher will email the transcript to the participant to check if they would like to add any clarifying information or if they would like to delete any portion of the record.
- Participants will not be compensated for taking part in this study.

**What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**

- There are no reasonably foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**

- There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. However, the data that will be collected will help the researcher understand if Smart Start helps students feel connected to the college and enroll the next semester. The research report will help administrators understand the impact of orientation activities to determine if orientation can impact a student's persistence.

**What will it cost me?**

- Participants will not incur any costs by participating in this study.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

- Interviews will be conducted in a private meeting space. In order to protect the participant's privacy, every participant will be assigned a pseudonym in the form of a fictitious name.

**How will my data be kept confidential?**

- The researcher will save research files using pseudonyms given to each participant. The research files will be saved at a home office computer that is password protected. Voice files that were developed during the interview process will be destroyed once transcription is completed and verified. Data will be coded using the participant's pseudonym.
- A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only members of the research team will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.
- Please note that the Institutional Review Board may review the final report. The data in the report will only display the pseudonyms given to the participants.
- Participants may request a completed report from the researcher.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of New England or St. Petersburg College.
- Your participation will not impact your student standing.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

**What other options do I have?**

- You may choose not to participate.

**Whom may I contact with questions?****General requirement language:**

- The researchers conducting this study is Kellie Ziemak. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at 813-767-6442 or Kziemak@une.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. William Boozang at 508-446-7685 or wboozang@une.edu.
- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Dr. William Boozang at 508-446-7685 or wboozang@une.edu.
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?****General requirement language:**

- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

**Participant's Statement**

**I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature or  
Legally authorized representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name

**Researcher's Statement**

**The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name